

# Correspondents' Correspondence

BRIEF TAKEOUTS OF MORE THAN  
PERSONAL INTEREST FROM LETTERS  
AND OTHER COMMUNICATIONS  
RECEIVED BY THE EDITORS.

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## Lebanese Censorship

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BEIRUT—Lebanon was traditionally the outlet for ideas fermenting in the Arab world. Political refugees fleeing dictators or restrictive ideologies came here to speak their mind. And whereas the press in other Arab states was and remains little more than a manipulative tool of the ruling regime or clique, in Lebanon it could say whatever it wished.

But all that began to change two years ago, after Syrian peacekeeping troops entered the country and immediately placed a damper on the media. A half dozen newspapers were ransacked, and a month later when allowed to resume publication found themselves under censorship. Other papers, notably those toeing a pro-Iraqi line, were simply closed down. By now, the nation's free press no longer exists.

At Lebanon's journalistic zenith, 101 licenses were in circulation for political dailies and journals. Several Arab governments made a habit of financing one or more of these for

their political ends. Since ownership was traded as fast as stocks and bonds on Wall Street, though, a reader might wake up one morning and find, over coffee, that his pro-Libyan paper was today extolling the virtues of America and Saudi Arabia.

Such freedom of expression could be invigorating, yet it also had its dangers. For the press had become an ideological battlefield on which Arab leaders exchanged insulting blows. "We gave so much freedom that it rebounded on us," says the man with ultimate censorial authority, Farouk Abillamah, Director of the Surete Generale, Lebanon's equivalent of the FBI. "One of the prime causes for the civil war here was the fight between different factions of the Arab world in our press. It kept up a constant tension."

Denying that Syria was responsible for the initiation of censorship, Abillamah went on to claim that the censorship law enacted in January 1977 was primarily aimed at what he described as the "second class press"—those papers that were being used by one Arab regime against another, and

he expressed regret that the "responsible" press had suffered in the process. There is reason to doubt his sincerity, for the "responsible" Lebanese press was, in fact, the gadfly of the Arab world. Some of this city's dailies, such as *An-Nahar*, *L'Orient Le Jour* and *As-Safir* employed the Arabs' closest approximation of Western "objective" reporting and consequently tarnished the bright picture that government-controlled newspapers painted of the various states in the Middle East.

In addition, the dailies provided information necessary to make critical judgments by offering a broad range of viewpoints; and a political scientist in this city noted that Lebanese newspapers used to have an impact even in countries where they were systematically excluded. (One could, for instance, learn what the Beirut papers were saying by tuning in to Israeli radio, which broadcast a daily review.) Thus, it is hardly surprising that with Lebanon today needing all the good will and financing it can muster, the government continues to muzzle a prized institution.

Meanwhile, people here are still debating what role the press actually played in the months preceding the civil war, and the overriding opinion is that it was not a helpful one. Indeed, editors of the "responsible" dailies seemed at one point to acknowledge that they had helped stoke the fires, and they expressed a willingness to impose self-censorship. Nevertheless, a censorship law was passed by the government, and this proved too stiff a drink to down.

In protest, newspapers began leaving blank spaces where the censor had done his work, turning their pages into checkerboards. Now that bit of chicanery has been denied them and violators risk suspension or being permanently closed down. Some of the more enterprising publishers have responded by launching Arabic publications in London and Paris. It could therefore be said that integrity of Lebanon's press has become an *émigré*.—MICHAEL TANNENBAUM